

# Black Bear

**Description:** The black bear is one of two bear species that live in Idaho. The other is the brown or grizzly bear. Black bears live throughout much of Idaho and are in no danger of extinction. As a matter of fact, it is believed that up to 20,000 black bears may live in our state. Black bears tend to be shy, are excellent tree climbers and to the surprise of many, are primarily herbivores or vegetarians.

## I think I saw a bear (identifying characteristics)

Black bears are not always black! Although this is the primary color, they can also be dark to light brown in Idaho. Nearly white bears, called Kermode (Ker-MO-de) bears are found along the coast in British Columbia and bluish colored black bears, called glacier bears, can be found in B.C and southeastern Alaska. Black bears have a roman nose, short rounded ears, and often times a light colored muzzle. Many have white markings on their chest.

## Look at the size of that thing!

No matter what book you open about black bears, you will find a different range of sizes. Here is a general rule for Idaho black bears. Males, called boars, average between 240-280 pounds. Can they bigger? Yes, but this is a good rule of thumb. Females in Idaho average between 120 to 140 pounds. I'll bet this is smaller than you thought. Most folks imagine bears to be huge. Some black bears do attain large sizes but Idaho black bears rarely exceed 400 pounds. Interestingly, black bears in other parts of the United States have reached enormous size. Good food supply and habitat produce bigger bears. Several eastern states have recorded black bears over 800 pounds! Now that is a lot of black bear!

## What else could it be?

Sometimes, where black bears and brown bears (grizzlies) overlap, people have confused the two. You cannot use color or size as stand alone identifying characteristics. One key to identification is the shoulder hump. Brown bears have a prominent hump over their shoulders while black bears do not. Brown bears have a face with a more "dished" appearance. To test yourself on bear identification, try the test on the Montana Fish and game website at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Bear Identification Program.

## It was just here!

You can spend many hours outdoors and never see a black bear. Sometimes, the best you can do is seeing where it has been. The sign of a black bear comes in many types. The most obvious is probably a track. A bear's front paw has five digits and claws 1-1 1/2 inches long. The tracks measure about 4-5 inches across. The rear track is longer, also with five claws.

Another sign of bears is their scat, or what they have left behind after meals. Overturned logs and rocks are often a sign that bears have been looking for insects. Bears will also mark trees with claw marks.

## Where does a black bear live? Anywhere it wants!

Black bear populations in Idaho follow the line of good-forested habitat in central and northern Idaho. Black bears also inhabit the southeastern edge of the state. Adult male bears in Idaho may have a home range of up to 56 square miles while females only about 12. A sow is nearly always with cubs and simply cannot travel as extensively as the male without cubs. However, habitat and food availability always is the determining factor for a bear's home range. The more plentiful the food, the less it needs to travel.

## Herbivore, carnivore or omnivore?

Black bear are "classified" by scientists as carnivores or meat eaters. They have prominent canine teeth and do eat meat on occasion. However, much of their diet is herbivorous consisting of green grasses and forbs in the spring and more nuts and berries as summer nears autumn. A black bears in Idaho eats about 95% or more plants, nuts and berries. Some occasional meat is eaten, especially carrion, the meat of a dead animal. . Because bears eat both plants and animals, they are considered an omnivore that eats "all" foods.

Top of the food chain? What eats a bear? Other than people, nothing! Sometimes male bears will kill bear cubs but no other wild animal in Idaho will look for a bear to eat. They are at the top of the food chain. Bears may be hunted legally in Idaho and some are poached (taken illegally).

Black bears may die as cubs, be hit by cars, or die from disease or starvation. In the wild, a black bear may reach 20 years of age, maybe a little older, but those are "old" bears.

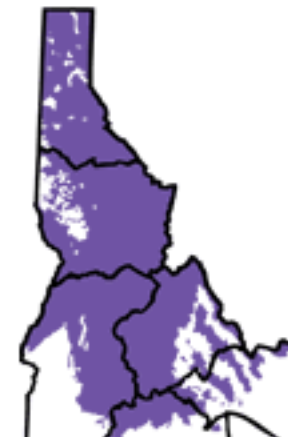
Do they only come out at night? Black bears can be active both day and night. They spend most of their waking hours looking for food. They use their excellent sense of smell and hearing from wandering too close to other bears or humans. Their eyesight while not excellent is believed to be better than originally thought but still average at best. But then, black bears usually live in thicker forests and swamps so seeing something at a distance is difficult anyway.

## Here come the cubs!

Black bears mate between mid-May and early August. Bears are solitary and only get together for mating purposes. The female, called a sow, usually begins to dig a den in October. Her cubs, usually two, are born in January and weigh about half of a pound. They stay with their mother until spring, around April when they leave the den. Sows are extremely protective of their young and are believed to "teach" their young more than any other mother in the animal kingdom. This is opposed to many animals which rely totally on instinct when born. The young stay with the mother all summer and together they will "den up" the following October. They will stay together all winter and soon after escaping the den in the spring will split up. The sow, if need be, will encourage the young to leave while she prepares to mate once again. The cubs, now more than one



Black Bear  
© IDFG



Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Black Bear
2. **Scientific Name:** *Ursus americanus*
3. **Population:** 15,000-20,000
4. **Size:** 240-280 pounds (male) 120-140 pounds (female)
5. **State of Conservation:** Not Threatened

year old, weigh around 40 pounds and must fend for themselves.

### **Sleeping In**

There has been much debate as to the act that most biologists refer to as "hibernation". Black bears do not "hibernate" in the same way that other mammals do, so some scientists prefer to use "winter sleep" or dormancy for their denning habits. The bear's heart and respiratory rates decline significantly in the winter, much like other hibernators. However, unlike "true" hibernators, they do not have a significant decline in body temperature. They also remain inactive all winter and do not feed, urinate or defecate like other true hibernators.

### **Outlook**

Idaho Black bears are plentiful and not threatened or endangered as a species. Although shy and reclusive, they do encounter humans on occasion but in nearly all cases, flee rather than act aggressively. As Idaho's human population continues to expand, more Human/bear interactions will take place. At this time, the most dangerous situation between bears and humans may be at a campsite with a "spoiled" bear or one that has lost its natural fear of humans due to the positive association of people and food. Learn more on how to best prepare to camp and hike in black bear country.

5. **Diet:** 90-98% herbivore including grasses, nuts, berries.
6. **Young:** Usually 2 cubs
7. **Lifespan:** 15-20 years
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom-Animalia  
Phyla-Chordata Class- Mammalia  
Order-Carnivora Family - Ursidae (the bear family)
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** Yes
10. **Hunting Link:** </cms/hunt/bear/>